

# The INQUIRER

The voice of  
British and Irish  
Unitarians and  
Free Christians

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**resident Lis Dyson-Jones**



# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

*Established 1842*

The Inquirer is the oldest  
Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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Photo by Giles Croucher

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## The kids are alright

By George King

The Youth Programme at the annual meetings has clearly developed over many years from what was essentially a crèche to what is now a fully functional and philosophical group which takes part in a multitude of discussions regarding motions in the Annual Meetings as well as our own discussions as a group.

Upon arrival at Keele University, it became clear that we were about to embark on a great adventure. And that was just the journey to the accommodation block!

Once bags were unpacked, rooms were filled and maps were obtained to navigate round the campus, first on the agenda was to assess this year's proposed motions and discuss as a group. The two that really jumped out to us were those regarding equal marriage/partner-



*Some of the Senior Programme participants attended the Executive Committee workshop at the GA meetings. Photo by Giles Croucher*

ships and assisted dying. It was no coincidence that these were the most controversial motions, but these really induced a detailed discussion and a general consensus for a group opinion was soon reached.

During the evenings, while the majority of adults were eating, sleeping and drinking (most likely the latter...) many of the Senior Youth Programme aided the writing, typing and collating of the GA Zette until very late/early in the night/morning (not quite sure which you would class it as). Inevitably, the 5am bedtime did no good for me and I never actually made it to breakfast... Overall, though, the Zette was a credit to Laura Hooley (editor) and all those involved.

One thing I would like to point out is the Youth Programme's gratitude towards the Unitarian Movement as a whole for their confidence in the youth and our opinions. The universal support has been a great help and we were very happy to offer our opinions in the discussions about those two motions this year.

I believe that, despite the exhaustion felt by many, this year's Annual Meeting was a great one to remember. So, and I'm sure I speak on behalf of myself and the Youth Programme, I'd like to thank you all for a great year and especially all the Youth Leaders: John Harley, Sarah Atkinson, Emma Lowe, Jen Hazel, Lorna Hill, Claire Maddocks, Louise Shatliff and James Barry for all their invaluable help and support. We couldn't do it without them.

*George King, 16, is a member of Cairo Street Chapel, Warrington.*

## Shall we do it all again next year?

The General Assembly meetings this year were inspiring, busy and a great chance to relish being amongst Unitarians. From the wonderful Opening Ceremony, to the appointment of our new president, there were substantive discussions, moving worship and many good ideas. Thirteen people spoke of why they are Unitarians at the opening service. Those accounts will run in The Inquirer throughout the year.

Thank you to all who took the time to write about their experiences for 'The Inquirer'. And, a big thank-you to Giles Croucher, who took the photographs this year. If you would like to purchase photos taken at the General Assembly meetings, please contact Giles at Trinity Cottage, Rendham, Saxmundham, Suffolk, IP17 2AZ. Mobile: 07795440541; Email: [giles@croucherphotographic.com](mailto:giles@croucherphotographic.com) Website [www.croucherphotographic.com](http://www.croucherphotographic.com)



# Becoming what we say we are

*This is an excerpt from the speech Lis Dyson Jones gave on assuming the presidency of the General Assembly.*

Throughout my life, Unitarian ministers have played an important part. But two who have greatly influenced me and who are both honorary members of this assembly, are the Revs Eric Jones and Peter Godfrey. Now, I can add a third to my list, because I'm sure that you will have heard, later this year the Rev. Martin Whitell and I will celebrate our wedding and both Eric and Peter, along with Peter Hewis, will be part of that celebration. You will, therefore, appreciate that this year is going to be a busy one – a wedding, a move to Portsmouth and a Presidency!

I have been asked by many people what my theme will be for the coming year. What I would really like to see, is us *becoming what we say we are*; to remember our past, for it has shaped us, but at the same time, not allowing any of its confines entrap us.

The wisdom of our forebears must be acknowledged and carried forward but we should not become intent on reviving the things which are obsolete.

We are a denomination of 3,500 people and we have heard, during these meetings and before them, the economic situation, our ageing, small and less able congregations, as well as the overworking of volunteers has had a constricting and weakening effect.

I think we must realise that we must cut according to our cloth and recognise the national movement as it is now, concentrating on what we must do in order to thrive and not just survive. We must face the challenge of realising how, in order to grow, we can become more attractive to others.

So, I believe we have to embrace change, whilst remembering to be what we say we are. I also believe it is not just *what* we do but more importantly, *how* we do it. To be tolerant, allowing for freedom to think and react with dignity and grace requires that we be lively and outgoing and respectful of the views of others, not introvert, inward looking and intolerant just because we may not like what is being said. Remember, we don't have to think alike to love alike.

There have been times when it would appear we seem to enjoy criticising and even under-mining those who have a different view or perspective. This, in my opinion, is not a good way to be for if we can't respect each other, how can we expect respect from others?

Seneca said, 'As long as you live, keep learning how to live and remember, where there is a human being, there is an opportunity for kindness'

So, we need to 'go for it' and be part of a larger spiritual process – walk the walk and not just talk the talk.

As we think, so we are, and it's not just the events in our Unitarian lives which shape us, but our belief as to what those events are.

To quote the late Rev Simon-John Barlow, another minister whose friendship I valued: 'Revelation isn't restricted to a select few, it is there for all who seek its truth'

We do have the option to change; even the most deeply ingrained patterns, but this can't be done without effort and may



GA President Lis Dyson Jones, surrounded by her family: (l-r) daughter-in-law Elizabeth; son Matthew holding youngest grandson Samuel; eldest grandson Joseph; Lis and her fiancé EC Convenor the Rev Martin Whitell; her daughter Sam; granddaughter Megan and Sam's partner John

not be without pain; but we can re-wire our brains to live a more healthy life. If we pause and try to look at difficulties from all sides, instead of rushing headlong into that arena of criticism and judgement; if we seek information, if we debate and commit ourselves to facing the truth and bring courtesy back into our deliberations, new thought patterns will emerge and changed actions will flow from our vision.

It is clear that change is needed, not just in our actions but also in our attitudes and we must open up all the channels. We must open up our minds and hearts to what is real now and not allow destructive and critical thought patterns and actions any room to flourish. Whether we agree or disagree, we should seek synthesis and not separation.

We must support our governance and the sometimes very difficult decisions which have to be taken and have faith in their continued efforts to work, on our behalf, towards respect, tolerance and re-connection. Remember, a team always performs better when they feel they are supported.

So, as I visit your congregations and districts I look forward to sharing discussion and the meeting of minds in fellowship and loving kindness.

We have freedom, reason and tolerance on our side and we must continue to act with conscience, integrity and dignity and with compassion too. So let us be 'who and what we say we are' – a caring community, embracing others in loving welcome, made up of people with open minds and open hearts and where there is no room for ego.

We have so much to offer. We live and breathe the values of social justice and I'm so proud to be part of a denomination which supports action and compassion for refugees, forced to live in circumstances they would never wish to be and the position we uphold with other liberal, religious faith groups on same-sex partnerships and equal marriage.

So let us put the 'open' sign on our door and really be a community of oneness, encouraging unity amidst diversity, committed to mature and healthy collaboration.

*Lis Dyson-Jones is a member of the Cardiff congregation.*

*For more information about Lis see: <http://bit.ly/JBq63l>*



# Stance deferred on assisted suicide

## Proposer promises full debate before 2013 meetings

By Robert Ince

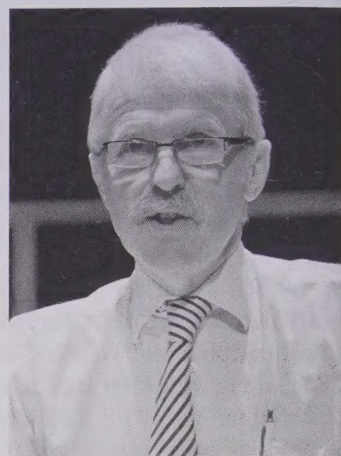
"I do like a good debate..." my opening words in proposing Motion No 1 at this year's General Assembly in Keele. The motion called for the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches to agree that: *Any individual who faces an intolerable existence because of a debilitating and/or incurable condition should have the right to seek support for the termination of their life in a painless and dignified manner, and Legislation should respect their choice and allow them compassionate assistance in achieving such a death without fear of prosecution.*

Well, we did have a good debate... though, in the end, we did not have a vote on the motion. The Assembly decided that it needed more time to understand and reflect upon the issues involved.

Naturally, I personally feel disappointed that we have lost a year before we can move forward into action to bring about a change to the law. However, we have an opportunity to strengthen our commitment to change and to build our enthusiasm to fight for individual freedom.

So, for those who have asked "Where do we go from here?" I can now reveal our plan to promote the discussion the General Assembly requested. I also ask for help from those willing and wishing to contribute to the debate.

We will put together a discussion pack to be sent to all congregations, district associations and affiliated societies with factual information, personal testimonies and spiritual reflection so every Unitarian can discuss, reflect and feedback their thoughts on where we, as a movement wish to stand. We will attempt in this pack to provide an unbiased, balanced and comprehensive view of what everybody recognizes is a difficult and emotional subject.



Robert Ince proposes the motion

There will be a motion presented to next year's GA in Nottingham that represents the broad consensus of our position and I hope you can all actively participate in this discussion. We cannot afford to lose another year!

I am extremely encouraged by the personal messages that I have received from so many people, even those who offered alternative views, and I thank them for their interest and their support to move the discussion forward.

If you wish to make a contribution to the discussion pack, then please send it to: [robert.ince@live.co.uk](mailto:robert.ince@live.co.uk).

Robert Ince is a member of Fulwood Old Chapel, Sheffield and a member of the Executive Committee

## Become informed about the debate

By Hugh Barlow

The debate on assisted dying needs to be fully informed. On the whole, speakers at the General Assembly debate were reasonably well informed, but readily available information has not been widely consulted. I recommend the Dignity in Dying website [www.dignityindying.org.uk](http://www.dignityindying.org.uk). Those who prefer printed material may request it from their office at 181 Oxford Street, London W1D 2JT. Their sister organisation Compassion in Dying specifically provides information on advance directives.

Dignity in Dying has information on:

- The present state of the law on assisting a suicide.
- The legal provisions and safeguards covering assisted dying elsewhere.
- The unsuccessful legislation proposed in this country.
- The plans for revised legislative proposals.

An advance directive is a legal document. Signed and witnessed in advance, it comes into effect when the patient is unconscious or otherwise unable to communicate. It informs a doctor or care home that the person does not wish life-prolonging treatment after, for example, a major stroke or heart attack from which they are unlikely to make a full recovery. First responders will carry out their normal procedures and, if the patient recovers quickly a good recovery is likely. But if the patient's quality of life is already poor, they may not wish to be resuscitated. This is not a request for assisted dying.

A request for assisted dying can only be made when someone has a prognosis of a slow, lingering death, especially when associated with intolerable pain (as with some cancers) or with

the progressive loss of physical capacity (as with advanced forms of multiple sclerosis, or with motor neurone disease). The latter can mean, from quite near the onset of the disease, that the patient is incapable of self-administering a lethal injection or medication.

This request can be made by patients in several countries already, then is confirmed by witnesses and certified by doctors as a voluntary decision. The patient's wishes are carried out by a medical practitioner when the patient decides the time has come. They may never exercise the option, but it is a relief for them to know they have it.

The well-known cases where relatives and carers reluctantly carried out the patient's wishes, arise from the fact that it is illegal in this country to assist a suicide: doctors cannot legally help them. Anyone who does so, or even assists someone to travel to another country for the purpose, is still liable to criminal prosecution, though the Director of Public Prosecutions has laid down recent guidelines which mean that prosecution will not take place if the motives are entirely compassionate.

Patients sometimes take their own lives, earlier than they would otherwise, alone and without telling anyone, because they do not want anyone to face the risk of prosecution for assisting, and they cannot wait until they are incapable of self-administering.

A change in the law would allow the doctor to do what the patient wished, when they were ready, but no doctor would be compelled to do so.

Hugh Barlow is an Associate Member of the General Assembly.



# The most famous ship since Noah's Ark

By Alan Ruston

The centenary of the sinking of the Titanic on 15 April 1912 can hardly have escaped anyone's notice. It was therefore appropriate that the Unitarian Historical Society meeting at the GA should be on this subject, as the Titanic had numerous people associated with it who were members of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church (NSPCI, which is affiliated to the Unitarians) and the congregation at Comber in particular.

Sandra Gilpin, the wife of its current minister Ian, has made a special study of the ship and those behind it. Her vivid presentation, given with an excellent power point presentation put the disaster in a different context. Built in Belfast at the Harland and Wolff yard, the sense of loss in the city was considerable. People were stunned and grief stricken at the sinking of this huge floating palace owned by the White Star Line.

One of the most well known of those who died in the disaster was Thomas Andrews, the Managing Director of Harland and Wolff and head of the ships design team. He and his family

were connected not only with Comber, but also the First and Second NSPCI Congregations in Belfast. Sandra outlined the long family connections with the congregations and well as the Pirrie family. Of his brothers, one later became PM of Northern Ireland and another Lord Chief Justice. The ship's design was state of the art and Sandra argued that Belfast was then the silicon valley of shipbuilding. The ship was the most advanced of its kind, almost a prototype. Anything that is a forerunner has associated problems which are subsequently ironed out, and this was no doubt a factor that contributed to the ship's loss.

Sandra's talk kept us very much concentrated on new information associated with the Titanic; it was a wide ranging tour de force. We look forward to reading at least some of what she said in the next Transactions of the Historical Society. (To subscribe contact the Rev Dr David Steers, 223 Upper Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT10 0LL Or email: [nspresb@hotmail.com](mailto:nspresb@hotmail.com))

*Alan Ruston is a member of the Watford Fellowship.*

## Spirit of 'history and hope' in peace vespers

By Feergus O'Connor

This year's peace vespers were inspired by the writings of the 'Congregation of Abraxas', an order of American UU ministers who saw worship as the centre of their liberal religious life, work and witness. Drawing on Eastern and Western religious themes, they were concerned with the forms and content of public worship and private devotional prayer.

Richard invoked the 'spirit of history and hope' to banish deep anxieties with the spirit of yearned for peace. We sang *Spirit of Life* and there followed a period of reflective silence in the midst of worldly turbulence, a prayer for wholeness and oneness and an affirmation of the ways of justice, mercy, compassion and peace. A sense of connection was invoked and all members of the congregation greeted and embraced one another with the words 'Peace be with you!'

'We gather as members of the great congregation whose temple is the world, whose membership embraces all humanity.'

Our faith is to celebrate the sacredness of life. Our hope is to lift the burden of oppression and pain: to strive for the dream of the common good. Our goal is to live in compassion with all persons, all nations, all living things. Grateful for the blessings of earth and sky, we covenant together.'

Following a homily on the Samaritan example of Clara Barton and the life-saving work of the Red Cross as a practical expression of the spirit of the Charter for Compassion, Richard reflected on the evil that still abides in the world and prayed for true valour that we may continue to struggle to yet realise the world of our heart's desire.

The vespers ended with the International Peace Prayer from the Upanishads and the chalice light was extinguished to the sound of a Schubert impromptu beautifully played by David Dawson.

*The Rev Feergus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green.*

## NUF takes on the concept of 'rapture'

By Howard Wilkins

The National Unitarian Fellowship AGM is always in danger of being regarded as an event with limited appeal. The NUF is a congregation without a building; a worldwide congregation who communicate with each other via the medium of the internet, the printed word and the telephone, so their GA AGM is their only chance to meet up face to face.

Tony McNeile, the NUF minister welcomed those attending and dispatched the required formalities without undue haste and got in plugs for the NUF weekend in November and the RE Summer School in August, before introducing the guest speaker, the Rev Bill Darlison, who took as his topic the Bible.

Bill started by getting someone to read the famous Laura Schlessinger email that starts by agreeing with Laura on her position on homo-sexuality because it is condemned by Leviticus 18:22 and then goes on to ask for advice on various other things that are either condemned or advocated in Leviticus. Bill has reread the Bible many times and regards it as an old friend. He said that the Old Testament shows God the tyrant

telling the Israelites to invade the Promised Land and slaughter those they found there. Bill went on to say that in the New Testament there is some progress in kindness but in places it was nearly as bad as the Old Testament.

He went on to say he took the Bible as a metaphor and it can be illuminating, but it does not contain the required spiritual health warning. Bill went on to give examples where biblical literalism gave rise to some odd situations such as the American airline that will not put two born-again Christian pilots in the same flight crew in case the Rapture (return of Jesus) occurs whilst they are in the air.

Bill said that the Bible is good literature but a dangerous book; and Thoreau said that it and other religious books would only be useful when we learn to understand their meaning. Bill concluded his talk by elaborating on his view of Mark's Gospel as being zodiacal as delineated in his sermons on his web-site.

*Howard Wilkins is a member of the National Unitarian Fellowship: [www.nufonline.org.uk/](http://www.nufonline.org.uk/)*



# Quakers have similar challenges

By John Midgley

In recent times, collaboration between Unitarians and Quakers has been more to the fore, so Paul Parker was a good choice for keynote speaker at the annual meetings. He is Recording Clerk of the Religious Society of Friends and was inspiring enough to earn a standing ovation. It was enthralling to hear the reflections of someone from a denomination that is different from ours yet close enough for comparisons to be highly relevant. He feels it too. "I'd like to tell you how good it is to know that we have some company over here at the liberal end of the religious spectrum," he began.

So the audience soon set aside the differences between us, and identified with a set of eight challenges that Quakers have. They too are concerned to find out what is going on with their membership. How do lifelong, perhaps many-generation Quakers get on with newcomers, the 'Quakers by conviction'? It's a challenging mix. Secondly, it's a challenge to enable members to be confident about who they are and what they have to offer. Would we be willing to wear a badge saying, 'I'm a Quaker (or Unitarian), ask me why'?

Next challenge, speaking a language people can relate to. "How do we explain our religious insights and understanding to people who know they are looking for something, but haven't got a developed understanding or experience of the kind of terminology we bandy about?" Challenge number 4 is actually living up to what it is we say we believe. This is a hard one. Number 5 is making sure people know we exist. "I don't know how it is with Unitarians, but the research some Quakers commissioned a few years back told us that people don't know about us. Most people have never heard of Quakers," he said, to grins of recognition all around. Challenge 6 is making sure people can find us and feel welcome. Familiar bells were ringing loudly here.

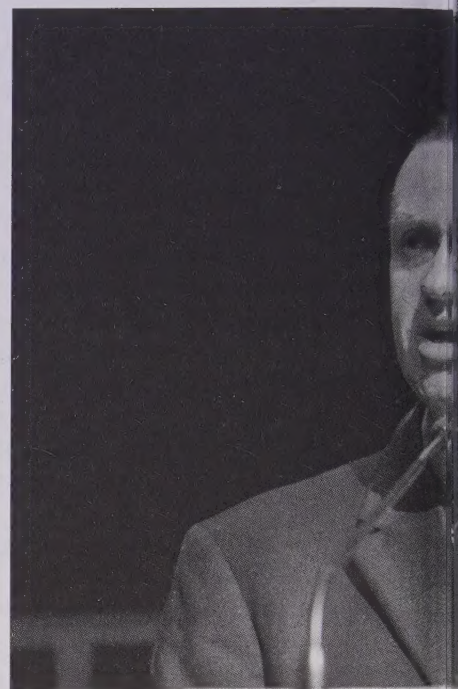
No. 7 is being effective, vibrant communities, closely followed by challenge 8, what he called, "Recognising the variety of ministries.

We use the terminology of ministry a bit differently among Quakers – it's quite a broad term for the service people give in response to their faith."

"We know that people are looking for something like us, as I'm sure they tell you they are looking for something like you. So we know that. We just have to have the determination and the courage to open our communities up and welcome everyone in; we have to believe we can do that, and we have to be ready to express what it is that keeps us coming to our meetings, after week, so that the people who are looking for us find us, come meet us, and keep coming themselves."

The clear suggestion was that congregations that can face all challenges and rise to them effectively will experience a 'whoosh'. Quaker Paul Parker's vision of that 'whoosh' brought his Unitarian audience to their feet.

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*



Recording Clerk for the Quakers Paul Parker at the annual meetings. Photo by Giles Croucher.

## How to be relevant in a secular society

*This is an excerpt of a speech given by Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, Quakers in Britain, at the GA meetings in Keele.*

Quakerism originated at a time of great turbulence in Britain in the mid 17th century – 1652, 360 years ago this year, in the time of the civil war. Quakerism spread fast, as fast as you could ride on a horse. George Fox (the 'founder' of Quakerism) and others addressed huge crowds and Quakers were seen as enough of a threat to be persecuted, imprisoned, banned from meeting indoors, and barred from the professions.

The early Friends were challenging the established order – they believed (and we still believe) that everyone is equal in the eyes of God, that there is that of God in everyone. What Friends then also identified was that theirs was a religion rooted in continuing revelation. They discovered in silent meetings that new light could come from unexpected sources, and certainly didn't require priests.

I've been a Quaker for about 25 years. I didn't try Unitarianism. But I tried a number of other church groups. When I went to a Quaker meeting, I found a group who were interested in me – they talked about what they believed, were open about their questions, and most importantly, they asked me what I thought, rather than telling me the answers. I kept going.

And yet, when I offered myself for the post I now hold, I did so because I had a sense that Quakerism in Britain could be about to go Whoosh! That we could be at a moment in our Quaker history where we turn out to have just what people need. I've been expecting that for a while – and I wanted to make sure I was there when it happened. I don't know if you have that sense too, that Unitarianism offers the

world something distinctive and desperately needed? Something that people would embrace if only we could find ways of telling about it?

Which brings me to the challenges for religious liberals. We just have to roll over, and say, the time for liberal religion has passed – we know it hasn't.

**Challenge 1: Understanding what's going on with our membership.** I don't know about Unitarians, but if you looked at Quakers 100 or even 50 years ago, the vast majority were Quakers because their parents were Quakers – what we used to call 'birthright Friends'. They knew Quakerism – they'd grown up with it, it was just the normality they were accustomed to, and they didn't need to find out what it was all about. Today we see a totally different picture. The majority of Quakers found their way to Quakerism later in life – most of the new members come to us in their 50s, 60s and 70s. Most of the people we presently rely on to help run our meetings, serve on our committees are in that age group.

How are people who join a group later in life (what we Quakers call 'Quakers by conviction') meant to find out about its traditions, its experience, its ways of doing things? How do we equip people? I may be the only person in their household to go out to meetings, church, to talk about the demands their faith makes on them, their time and their money?

More importantly, where are the people under 50? Where are the people with children, with busy jobs, with commitments on Saturday mornings? We know they're out there, and sometimes they come to events – but they're not a visible, regular part of our national Quaker life.



# s as fellow religious liberals



ynote address at the General Assembly

ordinary Quakers – being prepared to stand up and talk about understanding – of God, of faith, of peace, of worship, of sexual sorts of issues. Putting what it is we believe into words and prepared to tell people. I'm having some badges made that say 'Quaker, ask me why?' I think they'll be terrifying to wear, because people will, and I will have to respond. What would you say if I said – I see you're a Unitarian, tell me why? But if we can't answer that question, we're in trouble, aren't we?

**Challenge 3: Speaking a language people can relate to.** How can we answer that question in a language people understand? I don't know how many of you came to Unitarianism via other faiths first, but among Quakers we find that many of those 'convinced Friends' or 'refugees' from other churches. So they often bring some baggage, some understanding of the Christian heritage which isn't quite ours. Nonetheless we have a shared language with them – that Christian upbringing dies hard. But we know that shared Christian heritage is fading in our society. How do we explain our religious insights to people who now they are looking for something, but haven't developed an understanding or experience of the terminology we bandy about among ourselves – words like worship, witness, testimony, light, blessing?

**Challenge 4: Actually living up to what it is we say we believe.** This is a hard one. There's a lovely quote (in our 'red book', *Quaker Faith & Practice*) from the 17th century, from a young man who was apprenticed to a Quaker and was taken to meeting every Sunday. As he was nodding off during meeting, a woman rose and pointed at him, and said 'you're nothing but a traditional Quaker – thou comest to meeting as thou went from it, and thou goes from meeting as thou comest to it, and art no better than thy coming! What wilt thou do in the future? In other words, if we don't do something with our faith, then there is not much point in having it. I've got some sympathy with that. I don't think people could tell I'm a Quaker by the way I behave, but I don't suppose they can. But it's no use having a religion which is just words. Sometimes we can get too comfortable, too cosy in our meetings. But we have to get our Meetings for Worship right – so that they live up to what it says on the sign outside. If we tell people they can experience God in the silence, then it has to actually be able to happen.

**Challenge 5: Making sure people know we exist.** I don't know what it is with Unitarians, but the research some Quakers commissioned a few years back told us that people don't know about us. Most people have never heard of Quakers. Those that have overwhelmingly

think we are a closed, rather strict sect, and we probably died out in the 17th or 18th century. So we have work to do making ourselves visible. Each of us has to be willing to play our part in changing that picture in people's minds.

**Challenge 6: Making sure people can find us and feel welcome.** Some of that is easy, and some of it really isn't. Some of it is about basic practical steps – putting signs up, advertising in the local paper, making sure we're on the internet, making sure you can get your pushchair, or your wheelchair up the steps to the building. But the hard bit is what happens when someone new gets inside the door. Are they made welcome as they should be, not just the first time, but the second, and the third, and the fiftieth time they come? The United Reformed Church has a wonderful phrase I've been stealing, 'radical welcome' – it sounds like Quakers to me. It's about not just saying to people, 'you can come and join us if you're already a lot like us', but saying 'you can come and join us, and we'll make who you are a part of who we are'. Much more welcoming if we have the courage to do it.

**Challenge 7: Being effective, vibrant communities.** I want to tell you a story about two meetings I visited last year. The first was quite a small meeting – I turned up on a Sunday (we were away for the weekend). There were about 10 of us at meeting. I was the youngest person there by about 30 years, which is fairly normal. The meeting was in rented premises. We had a lovely, reflective meeting, and some tea and coffee afterwards. The biscuits were a bit stale. They told me how sorry they were there weren't more of them. I came away feeling a bit sad – maybe they won't still be there next time I'm in the area.

The second was also quite a small meeting – again I just turned up, and they were in rented premises. There were about 10 of us there. I was the youngest by 30 years. We had a lovely, reflective meeting, and some tea and coffee afterwards. And as we were chatting they were pleased to see me, and they said – it's great, you know. There are 10 of us now! We might even have some children in the meeting soon, and we're thinking of getting a building, so people know where we are. They were a new meeting, going about 18 months, excited and wanting to find out more. I came away feeling enthused and inspired, and promised to go back to see how they're getting on.

But what's the difference – to see a photo of the two groups, you wouldn't be able to tell them apart! But one will be there in five years' time, and the other may not. I want to know what it is that gives a faith group permission to think positively, to see that they have something to offer their community, and the people living in it. I wonder which of those meetings is closest to the congregation you're part of – and is that something you might need to do something about?

**Challenge 8: Recognising the variety of ministries.** We use the terminology of ministry a bit differently among Quakers – it's quite a broad term for the service people give in response to their faith.

Do we acknowledge what people bring, and the service they offer? Do we show them that we care about the rest of their lives, the fact that they are being a Quaker in their workplace, and their family home, their retirement home, if that's where they are, as well as when they come to meeting?

I think it's that sense of needing to belong to a community which gives us most to work on. We know that people are looking for something like us, as I'm sure they are looking for something like you. So we know that. We just have to have the determination and the courage to open our communities up and welcome everyone in; we have to believe we can do that, and we have to be ready to express what it is that keeps us coming to our meetings, week after week, so that the people who are looking for us find us, come and meet us, and keep coming themselves. That's not always easy or comfortable. And then, in our communities, to turn to face outwards, to face the world, and the challenges the world poses us, and to work together to build the kingdom of Heaven.



# Treasurers are sometimes fraudsters

By David Arthur

It is a shocking reflection on today's society that it was felt appropriate to have a fringe session at this year's GA Meetings devoted to the problem of fraud in church finances, especially by treasurers – but unfortunately there have been some disastrous examples in the recent past. Two of our most able and respected treasurers, Gavin Mason and Martin West, pointed out in their presentation that they and their ilk are the greatest potential threat to any congregation!

A couple of examples: one church treasurer transferred all the funds to his private account to buy a house, and the loss wasn't discovered until his death (the church got the money back from his estate); another simply took the money and ran away (money not recovered). It seems, though, that over half of all such frauds are carried out by a conspiracy of 2-5 people, making them even harder to spot.

There are practical things a congregation can do to prevent fraud: choose your treasurer wisely and carefully (often easier said than done) of course; always have more than one signatory for any transaction over a trivial amount; ensure written

reports at regular intervals; take special care over building work and contracts; and other common-sense measures, most of which apply to one's own personal finances as well. As a treasurer myself, I was aghast at the thought that these preventative measures are not already automatically taken by anyone or any congregation; but it seems that too many do not take adequate precautions.

Gavin had a set of slides, which are very instructive if you read them slowly, but lack of time made him gallop through them rather too fast, so that even the most financially savvy of us (treasurers already, perhaps?) found it hard to keep up. To those congregations who were able to attend that session, and have Gavin's slides, peruse them well, and act on them; the rest of you would do well to ask to see a copy of them – I'm sure Gavin will gladly send you a printout. Contact him through Fulwood Chapel, Sheffield or email [g.h.mason@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:g.h.mason@sheffield.ac.uk). A sadly necessary, but very helpful, addition to the Annual Meetings.

*David Arthur is a member of the Wakefield congregation.*

## Ministerial Strategic Group looked at possibilities

By Cody Coyne

I suspect most who attended the Ministry Strategic Group (MSG) session would have wished for two things – firstly, for more than 40 minutes, and a larger room. The significance of the meeting, given that questions could not be asked at the plenary presentation on ministry, cannot be overstated.

Still, Stephen Lingwood persevered. He began by allowing questions concerning the group's remit. A healthy debate surrounding the distinction between recognised and unrecognised ministers and lay leaders ensued. We were reminded of the GA's responsibilities for recognised leaders, and the goal of making available training and support to a wider group. Along this line fell observations about the geographical centrality of the MSG and training programs. People unable to make it to Manchester or London currently must find other means of improvement. It is hoped there will

be good dialogue between the Ministry Strategic Group and the Local Leadership Strategy Group to ensure people do not find themselves outside of the new system.

Pressed for time, Stephen moved on and asked two questions: What would we like to see in our faith communities (our goal or aim), and what is holding us back. The range of answers – from pushing for thriving communities, but lacking resources, to outreach, but lacking confidence – exhibited the range of worries currently in the Unitarian psyche. This information will be invaluable for the MSG, whose direction must take congregational interests into account.

We were then asked a final question, how can we remove this barrier? Stephen mused that this is ministry, discerning and removing the obstacle that prevents us from achieving our aim as a spiritual community.

*Cody Coyne is a Unitarian ministry student.*

## Welsh Dept: Visibility requires balanced approach

By Carwyn Tywyn

An EC key message, "Visibility", formed the basis of the Welsh Department slot at the GA. It was somewhat unfortunate, therefore, that attendance was partly squeezed by the popular EC slot taking place at the same time.

It had been hoped, and planned, that "Developing our visibility" would attract a reasonable number of non-Welsh delegates, having been advertised in the GA Zette and on posters in the conference milling areas. The failure to attract more interest poses an interesting question for the Welsh Department as we try to contribute to the wider GA. Nevertheless, the event was very well received by the 15-or so who attended.

I opened the proceedings with a review of communications work as Welsh Department Secretary. During the last year, various media (Blog, Twitter, Facebook, a newsletter, an essay on a current affairs website, and a public meeting) had been deployed, with admittedly mixed results.

In contrast, the Rev Liz Birtles described how Undodiad Ban-

gor Unitarians have developed with a minimum of public visibility, reaching out to local networks on an incremental basis. One observer commented that Liz's understated, yet powerful address was worthy of a platform in the main proceedings of the GA. Several conclusions were drawn in the following discussion, including the following:

- Visibility on its own is not sufficient. There must be substance and content behind the veneer.
- A visibility strategy is very much "horses for courses". The task of appealing to the general public of a whole nation (e.g. Wales) is different to building a local network (e.g. Bangor).
- There should be a healthy balance between using new media to attract new (and possibly younger) people, and using traditional media for communicating with established (and possibly older) members.

*Carwyn Tywyn is secretary of the General Assembly's Welsh Department*



# Women's League raised £8,000

By John Clifford

Like several other Affiliated Societies, the Women's League uses its meeting at the Annual Meetings to conduct its formal AGM. Like a few other Affiliated Societies do, this necessary task has been streamlined to basic essentials to allow for presentations of more general interest. The gathering started by singing the President's choice of a playful hymn, "Here I am, all alone" and then quickly moved down the agenda, which had strict timings that encouraged the business to keep moving – so much so that the meeting finished 15 minutes early!

There is a new President, Ann Harrison of Birmingham, and a new President-elect, Joan McFarlane of the Manchester WL District. The accounts show a very healthy balance although there was a £900 deficit on the year, more than half of it due to the loss on the annual conference. Secretary and Treasurer were re-elected. Next year there will be consideration of some constitutional amendments to make the Central Committee smaller. During the past year £8,000 was raised for the League Project, *Combat Stress*, and a cheque for this amount was presented by President Barbara Clifford to Alison Dart, a representative of this charity that works with ex-military who develop mental problems (primarily PTSD) due to their service experiences. The usual thanks and greetings from branches were quickly heard, although news from Adelaide that they were about to close their Branch after 100 years of affiliation was received with sadness.

There were two brief talks: Barbara Clifford reflected on her year as President, thanking all those who helped make her visits enjoyable and interesting, and then turned briefly to her concerns for the future: if the League (the GA's largest Affiliated Society with 700 members) cannot change to attract a new generation of members, it will die out with this generation. Attraction is a mix of DO-ing and publicity and unfortunately



Barbara Clifford presented an £8,000 cheque to Alison Dart of *Combat Stress* at the Women's League annual meeting. £8,000 was raised. Photos on this page by Giles Croucher

much of the work done locally is not considered newsworthy even though it is important and several of our congregations would struggle to survive if women stopped doing this work.

The Presidency then transferred, it fell to Ann Harrison to introduce the Rev Peter Godfrey to talk about the coming year's Project, Send a Child to Hucklow (SACH). He was the prime instigator in founding SACH 50 years ago and he had a fund of stories and examples to entertain and educate. He expressed gratitude to the WL for making SACH its League Project for the coming year.

*The Rev John Clifford is a retired Unitarian minister. For more information about the Women's League, see: <http://bit.ly/HF6xFZ>*

## EC workshop covered several issues

By Janet Briggs and Mike Tomlin

The meeting which invited GA delegates to ask questions of the Executive Committee (EC) was very disjointed. At the opening, we were invited each to pose one written question and hand it in. These were sorted into topics, and most of them were answered by different members of the EC, in friendly consultation with the audience, who, in fact, offered many helpful suggestions. It was evident from the

questions asked that there were quite a number of those there who had some misgivings in the way the EC was operating.

Inevitably the opening concern, which kept recurring, was the shortage of funds in these straitened times and we were enjoined to push the Bowland Trust matched funding as one way of increasing our congregational income. A member from Macclesfield told us of the great success that their church had experienced when they employed a professional fundraiser to help them collect money to pay for a building project. Ten times the sum requested had been found!

Young Unitarians complained that they were keen to help promote visibility, but they felt excluded from information, and discussion of 'adult' concerns of their own. In the



EC Convenor Martin Whitell

general discussion on communication it was suggested that we all make more use of Facebook and Twitter which can be efficient and time-saving ways of sharing positive news and concerns.

The EC is very conscious that its average age serving on the committee is quite high, and they said they would welcome young members, provided they could pass the hurdle of being voted on – though recent volunteers have been so few in number that no vote was taken and we currently have three co-opted members of the EC. However it was recognised that few people in their 20s and 30s would be able to spare the time for two-day meetings every six weeks – as well as the considerable preparation and communication time that this involves. Audience members suggested as a compromise, that members of the EC consult with younger members.

Recognising the impenetrable nature of accounts, to most people, two former Treasurers of the GA agreed that the GA Accounts need be presented in summary only, in the Annual Report, provided that it was made clear that the full version would be available on request.

*Janet Briggs is a member of the Glasgow congregation. Mike Tomlin is a member at Stockton.*



# Letters to the Editor

## Ministers weigh in on assisted suicide

To the Editor:

In the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey 82% of the general public believed that a doctor 'should probably or definitely be allowed to end the life of a patient with a painful incurable disease **at the patient's request**'. Closer analysis showed that 71% of religious people and 92% of non-religious people supported this statement.

This is not an isolated opinion poll finding. In fact, repeated surveys in this country consistently show that a decisive majority of people believe in the civil right of terminally ill people to be allowed to die with dignity at a time and in a manner of their own choosing.

Dignity in Dying, originally the Voluntary Euthanasia Legalisation Society, was founded by a Unitarian, Dr Charles Killick Millard, and its founding executive committee included the Rev Dr RF Rattray, a former president of our General Assembly. A later chair of the society was the Rev Ben Downing, a respected Unitarian minister. Among its present patrons are prominent Anglican clergy and progressive rabbis as well as eminent doctors and figures in the arts. The right to voluntary euthanasia is certainly a humane and progressive cause supported by very many past and contemporary Unitarians.

We therefore express our full support for the GA motion put forward by Fulwood Old Chapel, Sheffield, that '...any individual who faces an intolerable existence because of a

debilitating and/or incurable condition should have the right to seek support for the termination of their life in a painless and dignified manner; and legislation should respect their choice and allow them compassionate assistance in achieving such a death without fear of prosecution'.

We commend Fulwood Old Chapel's clear and informative background paper explaining the persuasive ethical arguments in favour of voluntary euthanasia, the recommendations of the Bill on Assisted Dying of Lord Joffe and the recent published report of the Commission on Assisted Dying, chaired by Lord Falconer, the former Lord Chancellor, and on which a former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and several eminent doctors and other medical experts served, and call on fellow Unitarians to show their full support for the Fulwood Old Chapel motion, now referred back, which we hope will be reintroduced and passed at the GA Annual Meetings in 2013.

Signed in a personal capacity by:

**The Rev Brian Anderson, the Rev Jane Barraclough, the Rev Dr Richard Boeke, the Rev Celia Cartwright, the Rev Dr Peter Godfrey, the Rev Peter Hewis, the Rev Margaret Kirk, the Rev Tony McNeile, the Rev Feargus O'Connor, the Rev Gillian Peel, the Rev Lynne Readett, the Rev Phil Silk, the Rev Dr David Usher, the Rev Geoffrey R Usher, the Rev Charles VanDenBroeder, the Rev Martin Whitell, Sue Woolley**

### More discussion needed on assisted suicide debate

To the Editor:

I carefully considered whether, or not, to sign a letter initiated by colleagues (*see above*) on the subject of voluntary euthanasia. Although, personally, I am an advocate for the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia and the letter clearly stipulates that my colleagues are writing in a personal capacity, I decided not to add my name to the letter.

I feel that my role, as a minister, is to encourage members of my congregation, and all Unitarians, to engage deeply, and prayerfully, with this debate over the coming year. This will enable congregations to send delegates to the 2013 Annual Meetings who are well informed about the issues, and are aware of the views of members of their congregations, on whose behalf they will be voting.

I am pleased to hear that the proposer of the motion will be circulating more background material, and I hope that this issue will be much discussed in *The Inquirer*, and by other means, over the coming year. I also hope that any revisions to the wording of the motion

will be circulated to congregations well in advance of the deadline specified by the GA. The exact wording of the motion is important in this matter.

This highlights the importance of reviewing the way motions are submitted to our General Assembly for debate. It is time for this process to be revised, to allow for in-depth reflection and debate on complex and sensitive issues, over more than one Annual Meeting of the assembly.

**Maud Robinson**

Minister with Unitarians in Edinburgh

### Is restructuring for good or ill?

To the Editor:

Why do we restructure organisations? To make them more efficient, to save money, to eliminate "dead wood" are some of the reasons put forward in justification.

Over a working lifetime I experienced, in common with many Inquirer readers, at least half a dozen staff restructuring exercises.

What was the outcome? Well sadly, in my experience, none achieved what they were set up for. After some initial severe pruning, each restructure

resulted in, within a few years, increased numbers of staff, inefficient processes and much higher costs.

Unsurprisingly the creative people who were making a real impact left because they were "too expensive" or not valued.

I sincerely hope that in restructuring the General Assembly support staff that we as a denomination are not only sensitive to everyone affected by the changes, but also do not lose talented people who serve us well and have talents, skills and knowledge that it would be remiss of us to let go.

**Marion Baker**

Sheffield

### Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.



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Why not come to the 2013 General Assembly meetings in Nottingham? Photos by Giles Croucher

## 2020 fund update

As presented at the recent General Assembly meetings, the new 2020 initiative will facilitate the creation of new and renewed congregations with funds and with expertise. Projects will not be created top-down; they will instead originate from the enthusiasm and creativity of Unitarians keen to start a new community or renew an existing one.

Importantly, no GA money will be diverted from existing congregations to fund 2020. A separate fundraising campaign for 2020 will begin later this year.

Although 2020 is far from ready to begin accepting applications or to conceive of funding projects, there has already been a great deal of interest. Some groups are already interested in preparing applications and some excellent discussion has been taking place on a 2020 Facebook group. Everyone is welcome to join that conversation. We will also be working to ensure that the movement is kept informed and involved in 2020 progress through these pages and via a web site to be launched in the near future.

These are still very early days for 2020. Currently, we are working hard to recruit the best possible board members to lead the project. Board members must be approved by the GA Executive Committee and several announcements can be expected after that group's May meeting.

If you have questions or suggestions, please feel free to contact me on [apakula@gmail.com](mailto:apakula@gmail.com) or 0780 9144 879. Sponsored column.

### Ministry Inquiry Days

**Want to know more about training as  
a Unitarian &  
Free Christian minister or lay pastor/  
leader  
and about working with our  
congregations?**

This summer the Ministry Strategy Group is again holding Inquiry Days for people who are at an early stage of considering this possibility as well as for those who are almost ready to make an application for training.

**London, Essex Church, Kensington:**

**Saturday 16th June**

**Manchester, Luther King House:**

**Thursday 9th August**

Times for both venues: 11am for 11.30 start  
– 3.30pm finish

**Booking deadlines:** 6th June for London  
and 3rd August for Manchester.

### Advance booking is essential

To book, please contact Mary-Jean Hennis at  
Unitarian General Assembly,  
Essex Hall, 1 – 6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY  
Phone: 020 7240 2384  
Email: [mhennis@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:mhennis@unitarian.org.uk)

### The Samuel Jones Fund

The income of the above fund is applied 'in augmentation of the salaries of such conscientious and Dissenting Ministers as shall stand in most need of assistance as the Managers of the Fund shall approve, preference being given to those who have been students at Manchester College, Oxford'. New applicants are also invited.

Grants are considered annually. Applications should be in hand by 28<sup>th</sup> May 2012 and be on a form obtainable from the Secretary:

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